



100 YEARS

NB. Any articles relating to the film Dunkirk that include any of the resources in this document, must credit IWM and reference at least one object that can be seen on display at one of IWM's museums.

Dunkirk: Fact Sheet

- The evacuation at Dunkirk, codenamed Operation Dynamo, lasted from 26 May – 3 June 1940, and managed to rescue 338,000 troops from almost certain defeat and surrender.
- The evacuation was forced on the British because of the successful invasion of France and the Low Countries by Germany, which began on 10 May 1940. This 'Blitzkrieg' pushed the British Expeditionary Force (BEF), as well as French and Belgian troops, back to the French port of Dunkirk, where they were easy targets, stranded with their backs to the sea.
- In an attempt to get these troops back to Britain the Royal Navy, acting under instructions from Winston Churchill, organised a huge rescue attempt codenamed Operation 'Dynamo'; the operation's name coming from a type of electrical generator once used in the room where the staff directing the operation were now based, deep within the Dover Cliffs. It was imperative that these troops be rescued – if the BEF was captured by the Germans, Britain would have lost her only fully trained and combat experienced troops and would have been unable to repel an invasion of the mainland UK, which everyone was sure would follow.
- Operation Dynamo began on 26 May. Defences were established around the port in order to protect the evacuation whilst the Royal Air Force sent many of their available aircraft.
- A call was sent out for all available civilian vessels to assist with the evacuation efforts. The public responded to this call in force, over 800 boats facilitating the evacuation. Many of this number were privately owned, ranging in size from lifeboats and fishing boats to pleasure cruisers and ferries, some of which had travelled from as far as the Isle of Man and Glasgow. Because of their small size, these 'Little Ships' were able to use their shallow drafts to get close in to the beaches, to the soldiers waiting chest deep in the shallow waters, and then transfer them to the larger Royal Navy ships lying further out to sea.
- Whilst the men were being evacuated from the beaches they were attacked relentlessly from the air, being bombed and strafed by the Luftwaffe (German Air Force). Despite this, no full-scale German armoured attack was launched, as a halt command was in place on the German panzer forces for 28-31 May, who were worn out by two weeks of continuous fighting and were low on fuel and ammunition. The prevailing view was that the BEF was a beaten force and that continuous heavy air attacks would lead to a quick collapse and surrender.
- The effort took just over a week, with the last British troops evacuated on 3 June. In the end, over 338,000 troops were rescued, a third of them French. Initially, Churchill and his advisers only expected to rescue perhaps 30,000 men; although 40,000 troops were left behind to be taken prisoner. Despite the abandonment of the majority of the BEF's heavy guns and nearly all its tanks the evacuation was judged a great success. Enough of the BEF got away to enable a defence of Britain to be feasible, allowing Churchill to state on 4 June that Britain 'would never surrender'.
- The achievements of the Dunkirk evacuation brought a boost to civilian morale, and forged the 'Dunkirk spirit' which helped Britain to fight on throughout the war.

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Dunkirk: Items on display at IWM's museums



© IWM – Spitfire Mark 1a N3200

Available to film at IWM Duxford

This Spitfire flew its first and only mission at Dunkirk – after shooting down an enemy dive-bomber, the Spitfire was itself shot down and crash landed on a French beach. It sunk into the sand and remained hidden for nearly fifty years, until a shift of sand revealed the aircraft. The Spitfire was eventually restored to flying condition, and is on display in the very same hangar where it flew from in the Second World War.



© IWM (MOD 35) – Model of [Landing Craft Tank Mk III](#)

Available to film at IWM London

Landing craft were devised to carry tanks, armoured cars and artillery to British troops across the sea. One such landing craft, the Mark I, assisted with the Dunkirk evacuation by helping to transport tanks as they were the only craft capable of carrying the 16 ton armoured vehicles. This model is of the Mark III which could carry up to 11 Sherman tanks.



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© IWM MAR 556 – [Tamzine](#), the little boat

Available to film at IWM London

Tamzine was the smallest vessel to participate in the Dunkirk evacuation and is now on display at IWM London. Originally intended to be a fishing boat, Tamzine was requisitioned for use in Operation Dynamo, the evacuation of the BEF from the beaches of Dunkirk, 27 May – 4 June 1940.



© IWM EQU 4588 – [Flying Suit](#)

Available to film at IWM Duxford

This flying suit was worn by Gordon Sinclair when serving with 19 Squadron at RAF Duxford. 19 Squadron was deployed to provide cover for the evacuation of the BEF from Dunkirk. By the end of that phase of operational flying Sinclair had become one of the earliest Spitfire 'aces' and was awarded a Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC).

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Dunkirk: Imagery and other resources available



© IWM ADM 417

One minute of archive footage from the evacuation at Dunkirk, showing the beaches, the destruction and some of the soldiers being evacuated.



© IWM (HU 41240)

British soldiers waded out to a waiting destroyer off Dunkirk during Operation Dynamo.



© IWM (HU 41241)

Three of the armada of 'little ships' which brought the men of the BEF from the shores in and around Dunkirk, to the safety of British warships and other vessels.



© IWM (C 1723)

Aerial view of burning oil tanks at Dunkirk, June 1940.

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Dunkirk: Spokespeople available

John Delaney, Head, Second World War and Mid-20th Century Conflict

John has worked as a curator at the Imperial War Museum for over 23 years and through that period has developed his academic interests in all spheres of conflict. However, he has retained a particular fascination for the development of armoured warfare theory and practice. He written works on Rommel, the development of 'Blitzkrieg' as a style of warfare, and on British tank commanders responses to German panzer tactics.

Ian Kikuchi, Senior Curator

Ian has worked as a curator at IWM for almost ten years. He is interested in all aspects of modern war and conflict, and has a specialist knowledge of Britain's war in the Burma during the Second World War. Formerly of the museum's film archive, he has a special interest in wartime newsreels and other forms of film propaganda.

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First World War Centenary

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